

Becoming a Religious Specialist: Thoughts for Matot-Masei

Rabbinic literature includes the names and teachings of many great and well-known sages. Yet, the rabbi who is mentioned most often in our liturgy is Rabbi Hananya ben Akashya—an obscure figure about whom we know almost nothing. We quote him at the end of our Musaf service, before the kaddish; and after every public Torah study session, to introduce the recitation of kaddish.

“Rabbi Hananya ben Akashya says: The Holy One blessed be He wanted to increase the merit of Israel; therefore He increased the Torah and mitzvot for them”. This one statement is Rabbi Hananya’s claim to immortality; this is what he has left to posterity. Without this statement, he would be totally forgotten. Why has this statement proven so meaningful to the Jewish people?

Rabbi Hananya offered a positive perspective on Judaism. While some might complain that having so many commandments is a burden, Rabbi Hananya taught that these commandments are actually blessings for us. The more Torah and mitzvot that we have, the more opportunities we have to perform good and productive deeds. Rabbi Hananya’s words reflect enthusiasm about embracing Torah and mitzvot as a great privilege and honor, not as a heavy responsibility.

Rabbi Eliezer Azikri, of 16th century Safed, echoed Rabbi Hananya’s teaching. We received many mitzvot and are supposed to observe all of them. The wide variety of mitzvot, though, provides each individual with the opportunity of becoming a “specialist” in at least one mitzvah. There are so many mitzvot from which to choose-- certainly we can each find one area of mitzvot that is particularly suited to our personalities and spiritual needs. We can each excel in at least one mitzvah e.g. hospitality, charity, visiting the sick, prayer, Torah study, business ethics, Shabbat observance etc.

Rabbi Hananya was not only giving us a positive attitude toward Torah and mitzvot, but was teaching us that we each have a role to play in the fulfillment of

the commandments and ideals of the Torah. We can each find something in Torah that speaks directly to us and brings out the very best in us. Rabbi Hananya's singular specialty was his understanding of the power of Torah and its appeal to the unique character of each person. There is room for every individual to make a singular contribution and to provide an inspiring example to others.

This week's Torah reading, concluding the book of Bemidbar, closes with a reminder: "These are the commandments and the ordinances which the Lord commanded by the hand of Moses..."

Keeping Rabbi Hananya's words in mind, these words are uplifting, happy and challenging.

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By: Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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